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Fixing the future

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Silicon Valley's business model has wreaked havoc on the world. Human agency will be crucial to save it

The World Wide Web, when it exploded into mainstream culture in the mid-1990's, promised to democratise information and level a playing field that had become tilted towards the rich and elite. When the United States Congress enacted the 1996 Communications Decency Act to regulate pornographic material on the internet, activist John Perry Barlow wrote [A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace](#), urging governments to "leave us alone" in a realm where "anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity".

"We thought it would create a new kind of innovative egalitarianism where any entrepreneur could come and start companies in a new level playing field," says first-generation Silicon Valley entrepreneur **Andrew Keen** of the Internet's libertarian founding ethos. "We thought it would create a remarkable amount of jobs. We thought it would be liberating and empowering for culture. We thought we were liberating the creative juices of society.

"We thought this technology would allow everyone to be artists and creators and writers."

The opposite, Keen concedes, has instead been true: technology has made obsolete swathes of occupations without creating enough jobs for displaced workers. Instead of distributing power, it has delivered unprecedented concentration of clout to a handful of companies in Apple, Google, Facebook, Amazon, and Microsoft.

But most damning of all, Keen observes, is how the internet has debased culture instead of making everyone artists and creators.

"We were promised all this technology would...enable people to speak in a more civil, creative, constructive way," elaborates Keen, who critiques the effects of Web 2.0 in his books *Cult of the Amateur* and *The Internet is Not the Answer*, "but what seems to have transpired out of this

user generated social media revolution when we do away with the curator and the gatekeeper, is increasing incivility. There is an echo chamber culture, talking to ourselves instead to talking to others.”

SILICON VALLEY OF DEATH?

Speaking at the recent Singapore Management University (SMU) Presidential Distinguished Lecture Series talk "*How to Fix the Future*" – which is also the title of his latest book – Keen singles out Silicon Valley’s business model as a prime reason for its current malaise.

“The future is broken because the dominant business model in Silicon Valley doesn’t work – it’s all based on ‘free’,” explains Keen, who founded the now defunct Audiocafe.com. “When we created startups in the 90’s, we thought we could give it away for free and sell advertising on the backend. It was a fraud model.

“It worked for some people, such as Google and Facebook, but the problem with this model is it reflects what I call surveillance capitalism. Every time we use these services, we’re being watched. That’s the nature of this business model. These companies are advertising Goliaths, and the reason why they are so profitable, and they dominate advertising so much, is because they know so much about us.”

With Big Tech commanding huge amounts of data and massive cash reserves – Apple alone holds nearly US\$300 billion – it might appear futile to resist the might of Silicon Valley. Keen, though, points to the example of the once dominant American car industry, which created its own demise as described by Ralph Nader in *Unsafe at Any Speed*. Describing American automobile industry as being “profoundly flawed”, Keen believes the way Big Tech treats data and privacy is similarly inappropriate, and is likely to lead to its downfall.

“We always assume that when things are successful they last forever,” Keen elaborates. “When you look back at the American car industry, you understand that when something is profoundly flawed it breaks and is replaced by something else. That’s exactly what I think will happen here.

“I think privacy will be rediscovered by digital natives in the same way that young people these days are rediscovering vinyl records. Privacy, which is a massive scarcity in the digital age, will become enormously valuable. Indeed, for innovators and entrepreneurs, it will be source of great fortune.”

MORE'S LAW

Whereas technology had been built on Intel co-founder Gordon Moore’s observation regarding the number of transistors on integrated circuits – Moore’s Law – Keen points to what he coins More’s Law i.e. Thomas More, author of *Utopia*, and the importance of human agency in fixing the future.

“Our use of agency in the industrial revolution is really important in terms of us shaping the world, in terms of labour laws and innovations, fighting pollution and injustice, creating social security systems,” says Keen, pointing out first wave Industrial Revolution conditions that took decades to address. “We need to use that agency today.

“An algorithm might be able to determine if someone’s sick but an algorithm can’t sit down with a patient and talk to them. An algorithm can’t be empathetic. Above all else, an algorithm doesn’t have agency. An algorithm can’t think for itself. It can’t be conscious.”

He adds: “Regulation matters. It matters because it’s the only way that we can fight back against these new monopolies and dominant powers. The problem with the Silicon Valley model is that they thought could do it independently of government.

“It was driven on radically libertarian principles which have failed in the same way the first wave of the industrial revolution failed.”

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